

Family court judge is 'principal' of new alternative school
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ST. LOUIS — It was the last day of school at Blewett Middle School and most everyone was somber, except for the judge in the lobby with the keys to the building and a set of blueprints curled beneath his arm.

Built in 1957 to handle kids from the new Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex, the north St. Louis school had been losing students for years. Pruitt-Igoe had been demolished long ago and had become a national symbol of segregation and urban decay. Now it was the school's turn to close.

But not for long. The city school district gave Presiding St. Louis Family Court Judge Jimmie Edwards the keys to Blewett this month. Edwards, a product of Pruitt-Igoe and the city school district, plans to start his own alternative school for juvenile offenders. It's a school he believes can turn around his beloved city and old neighborhood.

National proponents of juvenile justice reform are watching closely. The same kids in Edwards' court considered unfit to walk a regular school hallway will report here this fall for a full day of classroom education, social and mental health services, job training, tutoring and recreation.

Edwards called it "a great, great experiment that's never been done anywhere in the country."

It will be run by the school district in partnership with the family court and a growing list of child welfare, support and recreational agencies, many of which plan to have offices in the school.

The school is expected to enroll between 150 to 200 kids in grades 7-12 in single-sex classrooms grouped by age and ability. About 90 percent will be male.

Edwards said he was tired of watching children already hobbled by poverty, poor family support and gangs getting into more trouble on the streets because they had no school to attend.

"I said to the district, 'Give me your hardest kids, the kids you don't want in your schools. And I will teach them,'" Edwards said.

Juvenile justice researchers said they've never heard of a judge going this far to serve youths in the court system. It's more common for judges to develop special court programs focused on treatment or rehabilitation, said John Roman, a researcher with the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center.

Oversight of the students will be intense. Probation officers, security guards and security cameras will be in every classroom. The Division of Youth Services, Department of Mental Health and the Children's Division will be stationed at the school. All of them can share information and provide the judge daily reports on a child's progress.

The court will also check in after school with a formal reporting center, where students will be required to participate in activities — everything from culinary classes, complete with table manners, and boxing with the police athletic league, to special events with Cedric the Entertainer.

It's an idea that sits well with reformers who have argued for years that juvenile courts should rehabilitate, not punish, kids for their early infractions. Juveniles given education and positive alternatives will be less likely to commit crimes again, while those punished like adults are more likely to continue to break the law and end up in adult prison, said Mark Soler of the Center for Children's Law.

Studies suggest about 60 percent of black high school dropouts become involved in criminal activity, Soler said. St. Louis, a predominantly black school district, has one of the highest dropout rates in the nation — about 22 percent.

Roman warned there's the possibility that grouping such kids together in one school could backfire unless the kids are given appropriate tutoring, mental health and social support.

"One of the problems with these kids is they touch a lot of different systems, but nobody has any ownership of the kids," he said.

Edwards said he's got the power and will to do just that.

"Everything I have in my life was a result of the city of St. Louis," he said. "The city gave something to me, so I'm giving it back. I believe in the city's children."

MERS Goodwill is one of the school's major backers and will provide renovation work, financial support and run a job training program out of the school. CEO Lewis Chartock said Edwards' leadership is refreshing. Past partnerships with the district withered because of the constant turnover of top administrators, he said.

Superintendent Kelvin Adams said Edwards' timing was good. Officials had already planned to open two of its own alternative schools this fall to serve as many as 600 students who'd been kicked out for weapons, threats, drugs and other serious offenses. The second alternative school is slated to open in south St. Louis this fall. Officials have yet to decide on a location.

The district will also end its \$3 million a year private contract with Alternatives Unlimited to provide educational hours for these students. Last year, Adams pledged to end programs that were not working.

"I felt that we could provide better services to our students if those students were in our own schools providing interventions and supports," Adams said.

Edwards said his school will be a welcoming place — but not a permanent one. The school will not graduate any of its students. Instead, Edwards hopes the students will return to their regular schools, ready to succeed.

Many will have no choice.

"This is it," said Edwards sweeping his hand down the school's emptying hallway. "You can't be suspended from here. You act out, your next stop is going to be juvenile detention or the justice center."